

Politics of an Apology

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Australia's newly elected Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, adhering to his promise that his government's first order of business would be to issue an apology to Australian aboriginals, delivered a memorable address before a new session of the Federal Parliament on February 13th seeking the forgiveness of the country's indigenous people 'for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments' that had 'inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss' on them. In his wide-ranging apology, alluding to over two centuries of the 'settled' history of Australia, Rudd took special pains to say sorry to the so-called 'stolen generations', some 50,000 children of mixed blood who, between 1900 and 1970, were torn apart from their families and brought up among white people in family homes, orphanages, and various church-run establishments. The chief 'Protector' of Aborigines in the Northern Territories, Cecil Cook, described this in the 1930s as a policy of 'breed[ing] out the color', by which he meant that over time mixed-blood children, shorn of the nefarious influence of the indigenous people, would begin to display the allegedly superior morality and intelligence of white people. Cook was echoing a widely cherished belief, whose exponents have included such Enlightenment figures as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, that in the admixture of white and black, whiteness will always prevail.

Australia has doubtless much to apologize for, though in this respect its history is not spectacularly singular or even extraordinarily sinister. The demography of the holocaust unleashed upon native Americans – throughout the Americas, but perhaps most brutally in the United States – is a somewhat contested subject, but there is no doubt that the destruction wrought upon native Americans was colossal. The scale of the atrocities can be scarcely comprehended, considering that the conquest took place over some 350-400 years. However, even if the extermination of the Aborigines, and the absolute decimation of their lifestyles and culture, has its counterpart in other narratives of European expansionism, every such narrative has its own particular poignancy – none more so, perhaps, than the story of the extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines. Devastated by disease, hunted by dogs, and butchered by white convicts, an odd dozen remained alive less than one hundred years after they first came into contact with the white man. Held in captivity at a settlement near Hobart, they were photographed and so 'displayed' at London's International Exhibition in 1862. James Bonwick's *Last of the Tasmanians*, published in 1870, documented a woman called 'Trucanini' who was the sole surviving Tasmanian. We might describe this as the beginning of 'salvage photography': once she was dead, in the 100th year of the Declaration of Independence, she had been rescued for posterity as a museum piece.

So, apropos of Kevin Rudd's apology to the Aborigines, one must perforce ask what exactly it means to utter the word 'sorry'. What can this one word do to erase the sufferings and pain of generations of people who, in Rudd's own words, constitute among 'the oldest continuing cultures in human history'? His predecessor, John Howard, steadfastly refused to issue an apology: he feared a rash of compensation claims, and took the view that the present generation of (white) Australians could not be held

accountable for the misdeeds of their ancestors. Rudd, taking a different path, appears prepared to follow the recommendations laid down in *Bringing Them Home*, a 1997 report of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission which condemned, in no uncertain terms, the deliberate policy of several Australian governments to splinter Aboriginal families and so lay the seeds of their complete extinction.

Though Rudd's sincerity in issuing an apology is palpable and one must applaud his decency, it is also imperative to recognize that on his insistence the apology is being treated as an altogether separate issue from the question of compensation. Some critics suggest that the government should not be permitted to escape with an apology on the cheap, while others condemn all such apologies, unless accompanied by reparations, as merely symbolic gestures. Such criticisms, while not unimportant, deeply underestimate the nature of the symbolic realm: if symbolism could be so easily dismissed, what would one make of Gandhi's Salt March, or of his gradual transformation from an over-dressed young man in London to an under-dressed man at Sabarmati Ashram who sought some affinity with the millions of Indians leading impoverished lives? Reparations, too, can take various forms, from compensation to rehabilitation and even reconciliation. If South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission achieved nothing, and perhaps even let criminals get away scot-free, one can still nonetheless abide by the view that the very idea of such a commission constitutes a triumph of the human imagination.

If there is to be a critical outlook on Rudd's apology, it must stem from a larger geopolitical understanding of how state apologies have functioned in the public sphere and as instruments of state policies. Over the last decade or more, there has been a veritable epidemic of apologies. Leaving aside its various acts of contrition for having perpetrated mass killings of Jews, Germany apologized in the mid-1990s to Czechoslovakia for its invasion of 1938, and Czechoslovakia in turn expressed regret for its ill-treatment of Germans following the conclusion of World War II. We know of the Pope's apology to Jews, of Canada's apology to its indigenous peoples, of the US apology to Hawaii for the forcible annexation of that kingdom in 1893 – and there are many other examples. If the world appeared to have become a much kinder and gentler place in the 1990s and thereafter, one must also ask how many of the same nations that are to be found trading in apologies did nothing to prevent the draconian regime of sanctions against Iraq that took the lives of half a million children, or why they do nothing to prevent the gradual destruction of Palestinians lives. While apologies were being offered, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon were facing the brunt of relentless bombing from the air.

President Bill Clinton once stated that an American apology to Japan, for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was unthinkable. There is a perverse form of honesty in his remarks to which we should perhaps pay heed if we wish to unravel the politics of an apology. To say sorry means not only to express regret for one's misdeeds in the past, but also to commit oneself to renouncing similar actions in the future. Clinton was unable to say sorry to the Japanese partly because the United States explicitly reserves to itself the right to use nuclear weapons against hostile states or entities.

Chairman Mao, when asked what he thought of the French Revolution, reportedly said, 'It is too early to tell.' If an apology, contrary to the popular impression, is far more about the future than it is about the past, then unquestionably it is too early to tell what will come of Australia's apology to its indigenous people.